

EMPATHY EXERCISES FOR KIDS
Compiled May 13, 2005

Websites with activities or articles

APA Online: "What Makes Kids Care": <http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/altruism.html>

Education World presents 10 activities to improve empathy/combat bullying:
http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson/lesson191.shtml

"Teaching Children to Care" hotlink-site created by Tina Pauley, a teacher at New Hampshire's Campton Elementary School: <http://www.kn.sbc.com/wired/fil/pages/listcaringtp.html>

Family Education: Peace Building Activities:
<http://www.familyeducation.com/printables/package/0,2358,1-31432,00.html>

Kodak sponsored education project (4-6th grade): teaching empathy through caring for plants: <http://www.kodak.com/cluster/global/en/consumer/education/lessonPlans/lessonPlan143.shtml>

Parent Center on teaching empathy to children: <http://parentcenter.babycenter.com/refcap/preschooler/praising/65717.html>
and
<http://parentcenter.babycenter.com/refcap/bigkid/graisinggreatkids/67146.html?binky=MSNFAM:EDI:ART&refid=msnfam>

Character Education Lesson Plan: Compassion
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/nccep/lp/lp99v.html>

Character Education Lesson Plans: <http://www.tec-coop.org/compassion.html>

Understanding the Concept of Empathy: <http://www.lessonplanspage.com/SSOTerrorism-UnderstandingEmpathy57.htm>

Developing Empathy in Children and Youth (Article):
<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/7/cu13.html>

From: Bavolek, Stephen J “Developing Empathy in Families” (http://www.nurturingparenting.com/research_validation/developing_empathy_in_families.pdf)

Empathy and Caring

The link between empathy and caring - to feel with another is to care.

The root of caring stems from emotional attunement. Daniel Stern refers to attunement as *A...a process that lets a child know her emotions are met with empathy, accepted, and reciprocated.*”

"Parentese" - parent language matching the pitch of the parent's voice to the baby's squeal.

With repeated attunement, around eight months, an infant begins to develop a sense that other people can and will share in her feelings.

When parents fail to show empathy with a particular range of emotions - joys, tears, needing to cuddle - the child begins to avoid expressing and perhaps even feeling those same emotions.

Some suggested activities:

1. Care for plants, pets, objects.
2. Role playing the role of the victim in a simulated reenactment of the hurtful situation.
3. Watch videotapes of victims telling how they felt being a victim.
4. Write about their offense from the victims point of view.
5. Incorporating massage into a "gentle touch" philosophy.

Empathy and Discipline

NIMH found a large part of the difference in empathic concern had to do with how parents disciplined their children.

Children were more empathic when discipline included calling attention to the distress their misbehavior caused.

Some suggested activities:

1. Teach limitations of corporal punishment on brain development; social and emotional development.
2. Define the concept "discipline."
3. Develop family rules.
4. Teach positive strategies for rewarding and punishing behavior.
5. Empower children and their "will."

Empathy Instruction for Children & Adults

Empathy instruction and training enhance affective and cognitive empathy in both children and adults, as well as lead to more prosocial behavior. Specific instructional/training components shown to be related to these desirable outcomes include:

1. Training in interpersonal perception and empathetic responding - what empathy is, how it develops, how to recognize and respond to others' emotive states, etc.

2. Activities which focus initially on one's own feelings as a point of departure for relating to the feelings of others.
3. Activities which focus on similarities between oneself and one's feelings and the selves and feelings of others.
4. Role-taking/role-playing activities in which one imagines and acts out the role of another.
5. Sustained practice in imagining/perceiving another's perspective.
6. Exposure to emotionally arousing stimuli, such as portrayal of misfortune, depravation, or distress.
7. Expressions of positive trait attribution/dispositional praise; that is, reinforcing to children that positive, prosocial traits are part of their nature.
8. Modeling of empathetic behavior by teachers, trainers, experimenters, and other adults with whom the child comes in contact.
9. Activities that focus on the lives of famous empathetic persons (e.g. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa).

Empathy instruction and training have also been shown to lead to increases in personal openness, mindfulness of other's needs in conflict situations, improved teamwork, and greater job satisfaction.

“Emotional Charades”

Taken from *Adventures in Guidance*

The point of this game is to communicate emotion nonverbally to a partner. Start by writing feeling words down on paper or cards, and then take turns drawing cards and acting out the feeling without the use of words. The other person tries to guess what feeling is being portrayed. Follow up each word with questions such as:

- How do you know when you are feeling happy/sad/angry?
- How do you let someone else know you feel happy/sad/angry?
- How do you know when someone else is feeling this way?
- What was it like to try to express that feeling without words?

Questions can be followed up with a discussion about when the child experienced these feelings or maybe saw someone else experience them, and what that was like for the child.

Having a pet can help a child develop empathy. Teaching a child to care for a pet and to show that pet kindness and compassion often translates into more empathetic human interactions for the child. This is a cooperative effort between parent/s and child, with the parent modeling empathetic behavior and teaching the child the proper way to care for the pet.

Some humane societies and animal rescue groups offer classes in “humane education” that teaches children how to be more empathetic towards animals.